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GET DOWN WITH GROUPE

By Peter Miller

A hidden treasure lies on the bottom of Florida's nearshore and offshore waters: grouper. No one can argue the table fare excellence that is fresh grouper. And whichever of the four main species you choose to target, Florida is a bottom-fish paradise for anglers. Here's a closer look at the top four most popular species of hard-fighting grouper inhabiting Florida's waters.

Definitely the most common and favored grouper is the gag grouper. These brawlers can be found on both coasts and provide great sport for those who dare to pursue them. Gag grouper are one of the most managed fish throughout the South and their numbers are closely monitored to insure the future of this important game and commercial species. In Florida, most gags are caught by an-

glers fishing the thousands of artificial reefs and wrecks around the state. Gags have a penchant for breaking anglers' hearts, as well as their lines, with their incredible power, as any seasoned angler can attest. Gag grouper are distinguishable by their light tan or brown skin with randomly patterned brown mottling. With a huge mouth, they can easily choke down sizable baitfish and crabs found near submerged structure. Gag grouper are typically clocked in the 5- to 10-pound range, but some beasts can clock in upwards of 20 pounds.

Scamp grouper are the second most often targeted grouper by Florida anglers. They love rocky ledges and natural live bottom in depths between 100 and 300 feet. Scamps are typically smaller than other grouper and are distinguished by lon-



Using Raymarine's ClearPulse DownVision and CHIRP technology, anglers can target fish and bottom structure with photo-like, high-resolution sonar imagery. The LightHouse user interface lets anglers quickly dial through displays with ease, and a built-in 50-channel GPS with fast-acquisition position technology aids confidence while navigating. Check out the Dragonfly at <http://www.raymarine.com/dragonfly/#.UYOrcXCnAso>.



ger, pointed lobes on their tail fins. When Florida waters cool in winter, scamps will move closer to shore making this tasty grouper accessible to smaller boats.

The red grouper is another very abundant grouper in Florida waters. This mid-sized grouper loves to inhabit live and natural bottom, as well as coral ledges, especially those found in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. They are distinguished by their bright orange or red coloration speckled with white spots and bars. Red grouper generally spawn in shallower water making them accessible to many Gulf residents, especially in winter and early spring months. One of the reasons red grouper are so popular with Florida anglers is their willingness to bite artificial lures and jigs.

The fourth and most recognizable grouper found in Florida waters is the Atlantic goliath grouper. Considered threatened for many years, the goliath grouper enjoys "protected" status in Florida, making them a catch-and-release-only fish. These mammoths of the deep can grow to incredible sizes—six feet long and 600 pounds is


not uncommon. Their apparent lack of fear and inquisitive nature made them easy targets for spear fishermen before they were protected. Since then, the Atlantic goliath grouper's recovery has been documented and they appear to have made an impressive comeback in both quantity and size.

Tackle for grouper almost always consists of shorter, heavier rods, stout enough to lift heavy fish from razor-sharp coral, wrecks and reefs. Many anglers employ braided line up to 80-pound test to assist in wrestling stubborn grouper from their lairs. Stout leaders, up to 100-pound test, are also recommended to resist the inevitable abrasions.


It is important to use a quality bottom machine to find these fish. I am a big fan of the new, award-winning Dragonfly sonar by Raymarine. It has "downscan," which displays bottom structure like an ultrasound. Once you get used to this moderately priced sounder with its CHIRP technology, you will actually be able to differentiate between the various species of fish on the screen and target the ones you want. **G**

All-Tackle World Records


Gag grouper
 - 80 lbs 6 oz
 - Bill Smith
 - Destin, Florida
 - October 14, 1993




Scamp grouper
 - 29 lbs 10 oz
 - Robert A. Conklin
 - the coast of Alabama
 - July 22, 2000



Red grouper
 - 42 lbs 4 oz
 - Del Wiseman, Jr.
 - St. Augustine, Florida
 - March 9, 1997



Goliath grouper
 - 680 lbs
 - Lynn Joyner
 - Fernandina Beach, Florida
 - May 20, 1961




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